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DEPT FOR AF/SPG, A/S FRAZER, SE WILLIAMSON  
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SUBJECT: WHERE OIL AND DARFUR INTERSECT - FIGHTING REPORTED IN  
EXPLORATION AREA OF NORTH DARFUR

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Following reports of fighting in North Darfur, SLA/AW Commander Suleiman Marajan told poloff via satellite phone on August 14 that there was significant fighting between his forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces on August 10 and 11 near Wadi Atrun, an area Marajan claimed oil exploration is now ongoing. Marajan stated that a force of 270 SAF and militia vehicles killed nine of his fighters and 80 civilians in the combat. Minni Minnawi confirmed both rapid SAF deployment to North Darfur and GoS oil interests in the region, but downplayed reports of fighting between SLA/AW and SAF. This alleged clash follows July reports announcing the start of oil exploration in North Darfur's block 12a. If true, this incident could be one of the first reports of oil fueling the conflict within the borders of Darfur. END SUMMARY

#### PRESS REPORTS

12. (SBU) On August 13, international press (relying on exclusively rebel claims) reported that SAF started a "massive operation" to destroy rebel positions in North Darfur near the village of Wadi Atrun in oil block 12a. On August 14, "Al-Sudani" reported that the SAF spokesman denied these claims, saying "Up to yesterday there were no battles and all that is being said are lies." The same article quoted Ahmed Babikir from SLM-Unity saying that the GoS was "implementing a wide-ranging military plan in Darfur, attacking areas of Wadi Atrun, Al-Malha and Al-Sayyah."

#### MARAJAN REPEATS REPORTS

13. (SBU) On August 14, SLA/AW commander of the region, Suleiman Marajan confirmed to poloff via satellite phone that approximately 270 GoS vehicles attacked his positions near Wadi Atrun and Rahat. (Note: Marajan has been active in the conflict since its inception. Marajan was one of Minnawi's leading Meidob commanders, but was later imprisoned by Minnawi after he failed to attend the 2005 Haskanita conference where Minnawi was elected the chairman of SLA in place of Abdul Wahid Nur. End Note.) Marajan said he lost 9 men in the fighting, and that GoS forces killed an additional 80 civilians in the battle. Marajan stated that the GoS force was a combined SAF and militia unit.

#### ALLEGIANCE TO SLA/AW

14. (SBU) Despite a period of being an independent, Marajan repeatedly confirmed that he now belongs to the Sudan Liberation Army led by Abdul Wahid Al-Nur (SLA/AW). He stated that he is in regular contact with Nur, and Nur's field commanders based in Jebel Marra. He stated that despite his relative proximity to Minnawi, he has not had any communication with his former boss.

#### "OIL IS THE REASON"

15. (SBU) Marajan said the GoS is attempting to clear the area of

rebels and people to protect its oil interests in the region. He added there are three large camps of Asian oil workers between Wadi Atrun and Karab Atom. According to Marajan, the camps have approximately 300 vehicles, heavy equipment, and hundreds of men. Marajan was not able to provide the name of the oil company in charge of the operation.

#### "GOS SEEKS MILLITARY SOLUTION"

16. (SBU) Marajan said that this attack is also part of a greater military offensive by the GoS in Darfur. According to Marajan the recent visit of the GoS Defense Minister to Darfur was part of the government's effort to devise a military strategy and coordinate SAF, intelligence, and the government militias in Darfur (GOS sources claimed that the visit was to improve security to provide better humanitarian access, and freely admit that it also meant targeting nests of bandits and carjackers). "Bashir is now talking about peace, but he really is going to attack all of Darfur. He feels like he is tricking the international community," stated Marajan.

#### MINNI CONFIRMS GOVERNMENT ACTIVITY AND OIL INTERESTS..

17. (SBU) On August 14, Senior Presidential Assistant and chairman of the Sudan Liberation Movement, Minni Minnawi, told poloff by satellite phone that the GoS continues significant military deployment in North Darfur, specifically mentioning the cities of Tine, Kornoi, Um Baro, and Wadi Atrun. (Note: Since June, Minnawi has been in the field in North Darfur. As of August 11, he was only several hundred kilometers from Wadi Atrun with many fighters throughout the entire region. End Note.) Minnawi said that he has received reports from Darfuri traders and herders leaving the area

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of Wadi Atrun due to a significant GoS build-up in the region. Minnawi said that the GoS has long been interested in oil exploration in Darfur, something he urged the GoS to forgo until Darfur is peaceful and stable.

#### . . . BUT DOWNPLAYS THE LEVEL OF FIGHTING

18. (SBU) Despite his acknowledgement of the military buildup and displacement of people from Wadi Atrun, Minnawi downplayed reports of fighting. Minnawi stated that SAF recently moved into Wadi Atrun and took the city without "any fighting." According to Minnawi, Marajan does not have any fighters, but "just a group of guys who steal vehicles and money from the trucks." (COMMENT: Minnawi's dismissive approach to Marajan is not surprising given their troubled history. END COMMENT.) In addition to moving into potential oil areas, Minnawi said that the most likely reason for the SAF deployment was an impending attack on his own position and troops. "After Williamson's visit, my sources are telling me that the GoS wants to discover my coordinates and surround me," said Minnawi. Minnawi also stated that "The GoS is scared of my relationship with the U.S., and they want to target me."

#### OIL EXPLORATION ONGOING IN NORTH DARFUR

19. (SBU) On July 9, the Sudan Tribune reported that seismic work would begin shortly in Block 12a in North Darfur, calling this "the first exploration deep into Darfur since conflict erupted in 2003." The article quotes a representative of one company involved in the exploration, who reports that SAF forces would soon be deployed to the region to ensure a secure environment for the oil exploration. The article also specifically mentions the border station of Karab Atom, one area of conflict specifically mentioned by Marajan above.

110. (SBU) Norwegian Petroleum Envoy Anders Hannevik told poloff on August 14 that Block 12a is a "black hole that we have very little information about." Although he said he knew little about ongoing exploratory efforts, he did note that conducting seismic studies would require a very large presence similar to the one Marajan described. "You cannot do seismic in the dark," said Hannevik, adding that Marajan's claim of 300 vehicles "would be about right" for the manpower needed for this important step in exploration.

Hannevik cautioned, however, that he cannot imagine the GoS conducting exploration in Darfur during this very tense period.

COMMENT

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¶10. (SBU) Like many reports coming from the most remote and isolated regions in Darfur, it is difficult to get independent and trustworthy information regarding this reported fighting (the areas in question are closer to Libya than to North Darfur's state capital at El Fasher). Some form of fighting likely took place, but we suspect that Marajan's report is exaggerated. (Note: Sudan veteran, OCHA head Mike McDonough describes Suleiman Marajan as "a notable brigand" and many other observers have also questioned Marajan's character and notable silence in the last year. End Note.) What is more significant about this event is that it could be one of the first reports of oil fueling the conflict in Darfur. While there have been JEM attacks on oil facilities in neighboring Kordofan, this appears to be a first within the borders of Darfur. Darfuris, from rebel leaders such as Khalil Ibrahim to average citizens on the street, often claim that Darfur has a wealth of natural resources controlled by the government. Until now, these leaders have had little proof of these claims. With the possibility of ongoing exploration in North Darfur, all of this could change, further irritating an already explosive region. END COMMENT.

FERNANDEZ